



Enter online relationships with eyes wide open

Release Date: Immediate

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MADISON – Love may be blind but if your Valentine’s Day plans include looking for love online, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) reminds you to keep your eyes open for scammers who are ready to take advantage of you-and your money.

People using online dating services or social media to find that perfect match might just be forging a relationship that could cost thousands of dollars.

“The average financial loss from these scams is between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per victim,” says Sandy Chalmers, administrator of DATCP’s Trade and Consumer Protection division. “You may think you’re in a real relationship, but if your online love asks for money, get out.”

Many of these scammers troll for unsuspecting romance seekers online. You may be sent an inviting profile or a photo, and the conversation that follows is used to build a trusting relationship. The person on the other end often claims to be an American traveling overseas. They may eventually send you checks asking you to cash them since they can’t. They might also ask you to wire money to help them in an emergency.

Depending on how much personal information you’ve shared with your new unseen admirer, you may find your bank accounts drained and your identity stolen. Or you may have been duped into a money laundering check cashing scheme.

Other signs your online romantic interest may be “cheating on you” include:

- sending a too-good-to-be-true photo that looks like a supermodel
- asking you to leave the dating site and communicate by personal email or instant messages. Sharing intimate details in these forums could possibly lead to extortion demands for money in order to keep those details from being posted to the world.
- professing love for you in a heartbeat
- requesting that you send personal information including Social Security, bank account or credit card numbers
- tells you he or she will come visit you but changes plans at the last minute due to some tragic event
- asking you to send money by wire transfer to pay for airfare for a visit, visas, government documents or to help a family member in distress.

“If you use an online dating site, stick to a well-known company with a good reputation,” Chalmers said.

For more information or to file a consumer complaint, visit Consumer Protection’s website at datcp.wisconsin.gov, send an e-mail to datcp@datcp.wisconsin.gov or call toll-free at 1-800-422-7128. Connect with us on Twitter at twitter.com/widatcp or Facebook at facebook.com/widatcp.

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